

The Three Chief Paths

(Om Namo Mañjughosāya)

TSONGKHAPA

Edited in English with an Introduction and Notes by Bhikshu
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INTRODUCTION

Jetsün Tsongkhapa¹ (1357-1419 C.E.), founder of the school known as the Gelukpas or "Virtuous Ones", is one of the greatest figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. As reformer, organizer, teacher and writer he is perhaps unrivalled. In Tibet and Mongolia, as well as in other Tibetan-speaking parts of the Buddhist world, his writings have enjoyed down to the present day a prestige and popularity similar to that attaching to those of Acarya Buddhaghosa in the Theravāda countries of South-East Asia and those of Dogen in Japan.

The works of Tsongkhapa comprise eighteen volumes, together with another nineteen for those of his two principal disciples, which are considered inseparable from his own writings. Some are commentaries on scriptural texts, others original works. As an example of the first, mention may be made of his monumental *sNags-rim chen-mo*, an exposition of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (comprising volume III) and the commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra* with Haribhadra's *vytti* (vols. XVII and 2/3 of XVIII). Undoubtedly the most celebrated of the original works is the *Lam-rim chen-mo*, "The Great Stages of the Path" (vol. XIII), which forms the basis for the religious education of all monks belonging to the Gelukpa school. There are also an abridgement (*Lam-rim chun-bax*²) and analysis of contents (*sa-bcad*), of 201 and 14 leaves respectively, of the *Lam-rim chen-mo*, which is itself based on the *Bodhipāthapradīpa* or "Lamp of the Path to Enlightenment" of the great Indian teacher Atīśa. Says Lobzang Phuntsok Lhalungpa, "Whatever Tsongkhapa wrote on any subject is precise and accurate, clear in expression, and profound in meaning. His beautiful literary style is unique in Tibetan literature. His practical teaching is extremely systematic, with graded courses embodying the teachings of the three stages of development"³

These characteristics are exemplified in our present text, "The Three Chief Paths [to Enlightenment]", one of Tsongkhapa's short but important minor works. The three paths, or stages, are those of "Withdrawal" (*nihsarana*), "Generation of the Enlightenment-Mind" (*bodhicitta-utpāda*), and "Insight into Conditioned Co-production" (*pratītya-samutpāda*). After making his obeisance to the holy Lamas, or Gurus, the author declares his intention of expounding the essence of the Buddha's Teaching. The first stage, that of withdrawal, he says, is reached when, having reflected in various ways on the rarity of a well-endowed human existence, on the inescapability of the fruits of one's actions, and the miseries of continued rebirth, one experiences an intense aversion even for pleasant states of phenomenal existence and longs day and night for deliverance. Attainment of Nirvana for the sake of oneself alone is not, however, the ultimate goal. By reflecting on the sufferings endured by sentient beings, all of whom have been our own mothers in

previous lives, one develops compassion, and out of this compassion resolves to strive for the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment for the sake of all—thus generating the *bodhi-citta* and reaching the second stage. But attachment to phenomenal existence can be totally destroyed only by means of insight into the underlying reality of things. One therefore strives to reach the third stage, that of "Insight". According to Tsongkhapa this consists in apprehending the Conditioned Co-production, which comprises, in his teaching, not only the casual sequence of *dharmas*, both conditioned and unconditioned, but also the ineffable Emptiness (*sūnyatā*), which is their real nature. Yet until the essential non-duality of these has been realized the Buddha's meaning has not been fathomed to its depth: Nirvana and Samsara are the same Reality seen from opposite points of view. Understanding how each one appears as the other, and cancelling out "positive" views with the "apparent truth" of casual connection and "negative" views with the "absolute truth" of Emptiness, one will avoid all extreme views and attain the final goal. In conclusion, Jetsün Tsongkhapa exhorts his disciples, to whom the work is addressed, to realize the essence of the Three Paths for themselves by protracted solitary meditation.

The present version of this text, the first of Tsongkhapa's works to be published in English, has been checked against the rather lengthy and academic commentary of Phabongkhapa, a celebrated Gelukpa scholar whom the modern monks of Sera regard as their Lama.

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Triyana Vardhana Vihara,
Kalimpong.

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RJE BTSUN TSON KHA PA'I GSUN
LAM GYI GTSO BO RNAM GSUM GYI
RTSA BA
JETSUN TSONGKHAPA'S WORK
"THE THREE CHIEF PATHS"⁴

(text)⁵

[The Obeisance⁶]

Obeisance to the holy Lamas.

[Introduction]

1.

The essential meaning of all Buddha⁷-Teachings,
The Path commended by the Buddha⁷-Sons,⁸
That food for those, blessed, who desire deliverance,
I shall relate, according to my ability,

2.

Those who, not adhering to the pleasures of existence
But striving to make fruitful their opportunities and advantages,⁹
Place their trust in the Path that Buddhas⁷ delight in:
Let those blessed ones listen with open mind!

[Part I. *Withdrawal*¹⁰]

1.

Without a pure withdrawal there is no means
To still the longing for a happy outcome of the sea of existence ;
And by craving for existence, too, those who have bodies
Are fettered all about : therefore seek first withdrawal.

2.

The fancies of this life are banished by keeping in mind
That we have no time to spare of opportunities and advantages¹¹ hard to
find ;
The fancies of the hereafter are banished by repeatedly thinking
Of acts and their fruits infallible, the miseries of the Round.

3.

When, by so practising, there is born not even
For a moment desire for the Round's well-being
And a sense of longing for Deliverance, all day and night,
Arises, then it is that withdrawal is born.

[Part II. *Generation of the Bodhi-Mind*]

1.

But since that withdrawal, too, unless controlled
By a pure "mind-generation" does not become the cause
Of Unsurpassed Enlightenment's consummate felicity,
Intelligent ones should generate the excellent Bodhi-mind.

2.

Swept along by the flow of the four violent rivers,¹²
Tied with the tight bonds of acts hard to reverse,
Trapped inside¹³ the iron net of ego-attitudes,¹⁴
Encompassed by the great gloom of ignorance's dark :

3.

Born in unlimited existences, and in their births
Three miseries¹⁵ torment them without cease :
In circumstances like this are—our mothers !¹⁶
Think of their state and then generate the excellent Bodhi-mind.

[Part III. *Insight into Conditioned Co-production*¹⁷]

1.

Since, if they don't possess the insight¹⁸ that apprehends the underlying
Reality,
Even those practised in Withdrawal and the Bodhi-mind
Cannot cut off the root of existence,
Work at techniques to apprehend Conditioned Co-production.¹⁹

2.

He who sees the never-failing
Cause-and-fruit of all *dharma*s temporal and eternal,²⁰
And has destroyed whatever is the basis of imagination,
Has entered the Path beloved of the Buddhas.

3.

The apparent—the infallible Conditioned Co-production—
And the Void—free of predication,²¹ the two understandings,
As long as they appear separate, for so long
Is the Sage's²² thought still unrealized.

4.

When without alternation, simultaneously,
At the moment of seeing the unfailing Conditioned Co-production
One destroys all fixed ideas and conceptual forms,²³
Then is the investigation of views complete.

5.

If one knows how there appears as cause-and-fruit
Emptiness—clearing the negative extreme with the empty
And the positive extreme with the apparent—moreover,
He will not fall a prey to views which hold to an extreme.

[Concluding Exhortation]

When one has realized as they are, for oneself, the quick
Of the Three Principal Paths in that manner,
Wait upon solitude, beget the strength of assiduity,
And speedily effect a lasting counsel, O Sons !²⁴

- ¹ An appellation meaning "inhabitant of Tsongkha". To translate it as "Man from the Onion Country" as some do, is rather arbitrary, since the meaning of *bTsong* (also in the sense of "onion" spelt *Tsong*, as here) in this context is really too obscure for definitive rendition. Moreover, the "translation" referred to leads to confusion with the "Ts'ung-ling" or "Onion Mountains" in Chinese Turkestan. Tsongkhapa's personal name is *Blo-bzan grags-pa* (Lobsang Trakpa) and he is at least equally well known thereby to Tibetans. *rJe rin-po-che* (Je Rimpoche) is a title of honour often used to refer to him.
- ² Not to be confused with the concise (3 leaves) treatise "*Lam-rim chun-nu*" in volume II.
- ³ *The Path of the Buddha*. Edited by Kenneth W. Morgan. New York, 1956.
- ⁴ Lit. "chief (best, most important) of [all the] paths".
- ⁵ As opposed to exegesis.
- ⁶ *Je-tsun*, as above (*rje-btsun*); a title applied to (e.g.) Milaräpa, Tärä, etc.
- ⁷ Lit. *Jina*.
- ⁸ i.e. Bodhisattvas.
- ⁹ Those of the civilized human condition.
- ¹⁰ Or relinquishment. Skt. *nirvāṇa* or *niḥsaraṇa* = disgust with and repudiation of the world.
- ¹¹ Eight opportunities (*kṣaṇa*): not to be born in hell, as a *preta*, a beast, a long-lived god, a heathen, one of false views, in a universe where no Buddha appears, or as an idiot. Ten advantages (*sampad*): that a Buddha has arisen, preached the Dharma, the Doctrine survives, one has entered it, and been taken up by a spiritual teacher (five opportunities depending on others); to be a human being, of whole faculties, in a "central" country [one where Buddhism is heard of], with a livelihood that is not wrongful, and with faith in the Doctrine (five opportunities acquired from oneself).
- ¹² Elsewhere = Ganges, Indus, etc.; but here a metaphor for desire, existence, ignorance and opinion (*dṛṣṭi*).
- ¹³ Lit. "in the hollows of".
- ¹⁴ Lit. "holding [to be] I [or mine]", the term also covers "holding to be *itself*".
- ¹⁵ *duḥkha*.
- ¹⁶ In countless former existences; in other words, all conscious beings.
- ¹⁷ Though the Tibetan locāvas translate *samutpāda* simply as *byun-ba*, "origination", we have followed Dr. E. Conze in rendering it, as if directly from the Sanskrit, by "Co-production".
- ¹⁸ *prajñā*.
- ¹⁹ *rien'bröl*, lit. *pratīva* [-*samutpāda*]—apparently used in a special sense here. For a more detailed explanation of Conditioned Co-production see *A Survey of Buddhism* (2nd edition Bangalore, 1959) by Bhikshu Sangharakshita, pp. 100-118.
- ²⁰ Lit. "[of] the Round and Nirvana".
- ²¹ Of which nothing can in the ultimate sense be affirmed or denied.
- ²² Lit. *muni*.
- ²³ Lit. "object-grasping modes".
- ²⁴ i.e. the author's disciples, who of course are his spiritual sons.